

## **Memoir Vignette:**

### First Day of American School

I was nine years old when my dad decided to bring me to Philly, and my mom, despite knowing what it meant, agreed. I'm Latina, with bushy eyebrows that reminded me of Frida Kahlo and my hair is abundant and particular. When I was a kid I was frequently asked if my dad was black, in search of an explanation as to why my hair was the way it was. Within a few months of arriving in Philly, I lived one of the most terrifying moments of my existence. Nine years old and I was walking beside my dad holding his hand on my way to my new American school that was only a few blocks from my house. I had my impeccable uniform, a navy blue skirt, white T-shirt, black shoes, and stockings of the same color as the skirt. I looked like Dora the Explorer with my short, puffy hair and a backpack that had a picture of Minions on it. All I needed was a talking monkey.

My shoes, uniform, and school were all new. I was new to America and America was new to me. Like people say in Colombia, I was fresh out of the oven. The closer I got to the school holding my dad's hand, the more excitement I felt. Little by little that excitement turned into fear. I felt terror when I remembered that I only spoke Spanish, and for a second I wished I was with my mom back in Colombia. When my dad let go of my hand it seemed as if the earth opened up to swallow me but I kept walking towards my classroom. I felt as if everyone was looking at me and judging. My legs were shaking and my heart was beating so fast. As I walked into the classroom, my panic increased. There were more than 25 kids, everyone was so different, so unique. So many colors, eyes, hair types. So much diversity in one single place, I had never seen anything like it. The English teacher, Ms. Lanahan, was very skinny, short blonde hair, about 5'2", bright blue eyes, and looked so elegant. Then I heard her speak and her voice was so comforting and gentle. Just by a couple of her features, I assumed that she was going to be a marvelous teacher, and I was right. I was so distracted looking at everyone and everything. It was a whole different world to me, then Ms. Lanahan called out my name. I was paralyzed, I wanted to cry. I didn't know if the name she called was actually mine. I had never heard someone pronounce my name like that. I had nothing to say, I didn't want to be there. I didn't understand anything that was happening.

There I was, sitting, not saying a word just looking at Ms. Lanahan talk to me. I was completely paralyzed. I was surrounded by so many people but I still felt extremely alone and vulnerable. After a little while, the teacher called someone over to help her figure out what was going on with me. They then decided to make me switch classes in hopes of a better outcome. But to my surprise, the solution was right in front of me. Ms. Lanahan, with her gentle voice, asked the class if anybody spoke Spanish...and then he appeared, Lucas. A chubby boy, with brown skin, black eyes, and straight dark hair down to his shoulders. He spoke Spanish perfectly because he had also immigrated to the U.S., from Peru. Ms Lanahan sat me next to him and from that day on, Lucas

became my own personal English teacher and a very close friend. That day, being just a little girl, with features more similar to those of Lucas than to those of any other child sitting in that room, I understood various things in life and the world. There I was, with other kids that were also from different countries. I, who did not understand or speak English, had a boy my age as a teacher. I was so lucky to have had such a wonderful teacher and an incredible friend. I learned how to keep going, and keep trying in spite of all the difficulties...as my grandma would say, “pa delante porque hacia atrás asustan”. It’s an idiom that basically means to keep going forward because turning back is scarier.

### **Artist statement:**

One part of Noah’s memoir that really inspired me to write about my topic was when he spoke about being new to his school. How he had to pick a group to be with and how he felt like he didn’t belong. I really liked the way he explained how he felt and what he went through. I can understand how he felt because I felt a lot of the same things too. That feeling of not belonging somewhere really stuck with me. He talked a lot about being an outsider on multiple occasions which is most likely something that impacted his identity today. In chapter 11: Outsider, he talked about his school experience, how he felt about not belonging, and always having to pick a group even when he didn’t really have any to choose. I really enjoyed his writing style. He made his stories funny and entertaining to read even when some of the moments he talked about were traumatic. He also included a lot of his own culture and identity into his writing. For example, when he wrote in the language his mom yelled at him. It made the reader connect with him. His stories were very descriptive too which I loved, I imagined everything that he wrote about in my head, and so it made me want to make my story as descriptive as possible. Some storytelling techniques I used were visual descriptions, a little bit of humor, and some reflective moments. I didn’t add a lot of humor to my story. I just used it I felt like maybe it didn’t fit right with my story or I didn’t know exactly where to add humor. Even though I tried to add a little bit of humor when I described what I wore to my first day of school because I always thought it was funny. I talked about where I came from, my culture as an immigrant, I talked about myself, and how I had to learn and live in a whole new culture. That explains my culture and identity to an outsider. One of the essential questions of this unit was “ **How do our various cultures influence our identities?**” in my vignette, I talked about how being influenced by different cultures affected me. It was like stepping into a whole new world and that changed my life completely. Being influenced by American culture as well as my own influenced the way I am now. It

taught me so many new things that maybe I wouldn't have learned if it wasn't such a big part of my life.